

PULLING the THREAD:

THE ART TEACHER'S PRAYER (After William Stafford)

Let me start from where they are. Let me begin
the only intervention with words like,
“It is your idea. Where do you want it to go?”

Even when they bristle,
when they tell me I am the expert, the artist,
the only one in the room who knows,
let me refuse to believe
they lack the capacity for judging their work,
making it good in their own eyes.

Let me acknowledge
the empty page is a promise,
not an absence.

Let me lead in silence,
pulling a thin thread with sure hands
into the moment that only opens
because of where they are.

~ Sally A. Gradle



PRETTY

Selma had a thick history, tabs like tombstones
marked her past.
No one thought she could draw.
Unresponsive, lazy, they called her,
with little inclination to learn.
A vacant lot--no trouble really--
just a lumbering
slowness, a lost letter
stuck in the institutional drawer.

Then came Schaefer and his words found Selma.
The moment crackled, space opened,
potential surged through every circuit
as he showed her some drawings.

Do you like this picture? Schaefer asked her.
Respect unfurled before her and waited without a smile.
Look for a while. Why don't you draw something yourself?
Make a pretty picture. Something you like.

Twenty minutes later, she was done.
The sun hung in her sky,
trees and flowers spanned the page
not one touched another, or the grassy green.

Look at this! What you've done.
You did some wonderful work. What a fine job to finish!

The room inflated, a buoyant raft,
a safety zone,
perhaps a place for path makers.

Selma reached for paper and began again.
A large wavy line, blue above a big tree,
with smaller trees
on either side,
new forms of her own design.

Another work. What a great thing to do this!
You have worked hard.

A third drawing, this time
Selma chose her own colors from the box.

*Work slowly. Go carefully. Take all the time
you like. You do not need to hurry. Make it the way you want.*

Small, unspoiled beginnings.
Weeks of little changes
To the hills, the flowers, skies and trees.
Each day unfolding
more of what she knew she could do.

That was the real story Schaefer taught us--
how it was *all* there *all* the time.
How Selma's work
opened to become her home,
her place to be.
How it made her, grew a shy smile
that spread over us
like hope,
this art of her own making.

~ Sally A. Gradle

A full account of art educator Henry Schaefer-Simmern's case study of Selma can be read in his book *The Unfolding of Artistic Activity* (1948). The educational psychologist Seymour Sarason who was present at Southbury Training School for the case study also tells a parallel documentation of the same event. Sarason has written about the profound effect of Schaefer-Simmern's teaching in several of his publications.

THE SMALL START

If you draw very small in the middle of the page
then the empty space seizes

the eye, takes over. The important
marks you made will be like a celebration

happening in the next town
on the fourth of July.

Some eyes will strain to determine
its source, remembering

other shy thoughts they too
have had, the tender shoots

that once sprouted as uncertainties.
Others will wonder why

you let the paper say so much.
They will not be aware

that this was the best opening
your mind could make just then

to let this little thing out.

~ **Sally A. Gradle**

FORM

Cautiously, snowpack releases winter.
Water is surprised to be awake.

Gaining confidence, it sings as it gathers itself
to go great distances.

With each passing day, a child can draw
more like swift running water.

One rivy line suggests the next
could be waiting.

The movement, a dance between
image and insight,

between the hand that holds the crayon,
and the mind that moves the muscles.

All of this flows, capturing pebbles,
uprooting trees, dislodging small animals

bones and relics
on the way to forming a world out there.

All of this.

~ Sally A. Gradle



THE LOVE POEM

He pushed the fragile bundle
to the table's edge, fixed her blankets,
and said to all of us,

She's still here.

She knows what you're saying.

She's still the same person.

Putting a paintbrush in her hand,
pulling the page near her right side.

Here you go, my dear.

Paint away.

She thanked him,
a color spread slowly
across the page, like sleep.

Each day attentive to her needs,
he informed us

She had a rough night last night.

Fell asleep during breakfast.

Still wants to come to art class.

Each day asking her

What color, how much, where should it go.

Do you want help, here try another.

Each day remarking on her spirit

*Good try, marvelous to keep going, isn't she
doing well, what art.*

Once when the praise hovered thick, I think
I heard her say, *Oh, just be quiet.*

Their story legend, we watched them leave
and wondered if any of us could be like this pair someday.

What if we were the one whose mind and muscles
no longer went where we wanted,
what would our spouses do?
Give up everything to be by our side, doing art until the end of our time?

Slowly her words formed the last day of class.
She turned to him like a blossom:

I learned so much about you.

~ **Sally A. Gradle**

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appeared in the
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RIGHT WORK

The right work makes a nest of your time
so that all things either fit within
or fly away.

Branches stir, but support you.
The sky twirls
its starry nights, but you

have gathered yourself and learned.
While others wait to be named
or fed or chosen,

you live now. Clarity grows
like a day opened wide to the sky.
Take it.

~ **Sally A. Gradle**



TEACHING

So you do it:

flinging boulders aside
crafting intricate sailing vessels
scaling ice if you have to
and forging the first one of everything over and over,
creating art of your life.

There is no preamble to teaching.

It just opens things by being the door of a church
space for a bird
a shovel.

~ **Sally A. Gradle**

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